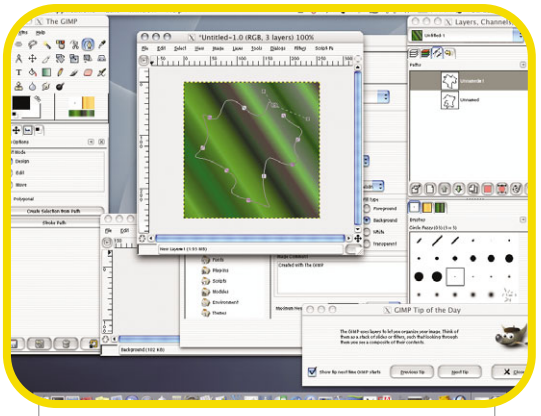
in the user/developer community to keep the app reliable and secure.

That isn't to say open-source applications don't come with risks. Open source is a global movement, so many projects originate outside the United States, as do many contributors. Take caution when downloading and installing software, whether open or closed. Ideally, you wouldn't run any software on your PC that you hadn't compiled yourself from source and without checking that source code to verify the software does what it claims to and that it doesn't do anything that might be harmful. You can't do any of that with most commercial software, so for a truly secure computing environment, open source may be your only option.

The greatest security concern may be making sure you download and install the app you want, especially if it's compiled binary code. You don't want to download and install malware when you were expecting a Web browser. Open-source developers know this. To protect their reputations, they generally take all security precautions to prevent attackers from inserting malware in place of actual software.



The GIMP, a free and easy-to-use alternative to Photoshop, runs under Mac OS X, Windows, Linux, and other Unix OSes.

Another fear users have is using a piece of software that's offered as legitimate but that's actually malware. For example, you wouldn't want to install a spyware detector that actually installs more spyware on your system. You can usually avoid this type of problem by using software from projects with a good reputation. Many open-source projects are funded by corporations or are led by well-known programmers. Again, your best protection is to scrutinize the source and compile it yourself, if you need a higher degree of assurance.

As with commercial products, there's a fair amount of variability in availability and function of open-source applications. There's a wealth of well-known, reputable, and reliable general-purpose software for apps such as word processing, spreadsheet, system utilities, and networking, plus various less known projects. Fewer projects of less repute are likely to be available for specialized applications, but they are available.

Finally, proprietary software vendors often argue that with open-source software, there's no company behind the code, implying that if it fails, there's no one to hold responsible. What they don't mention is that commercial software licenses, like open-source licenses, disclaim all responsibility for the software doing what it's supposed to do. You're as unlikely to recover damages from a proprietary vendor as from an open-source project if an app miscalculates your company's budget figures. CPU

by Pete Loshin

Open-Source Software For Mac OS X

Mac users aren't left out of the free software fun. Because it's built on Unix, Mac OS X can use most open-source software written for Linux and other Unix OSes. In many cases ports are already available, so the software may be as easy to install as any commercial application.

The Web site of Mac OS aficionado Marc Liyanage (www.entropy.ch/software/macosx) is a trove of open-source software that's ready to work with Mac OS X. The goodies there include PHP 5 (the easiest way to get PHP running on your Mac), MySQL and PostgreSQL database servers, ImageMagick Image Manipulation Tools, and a handful of other utilities.

An easy way to install a wide variety of open-source software on your Mac (and make sure it's installed properly) is to use Fink (fink.sourceforge.net). Fink is compatible with Debian Linux's apt-get function, meaning that you can browse hundreds of Mac OS-ported open-source programs from a menu and then download and install any of them with a keystroke. You don't have to worry about makefiles or configuration scripts; Fink software just works. Fink installs programs in its own directory instead of the Mac OS directories, so it won't trash your system or files.

DarwinPorts (darwinports.opendarwin.org) is a similar project that delivers Mac OS ports of about 2,400 applications. You can download and install any of the software using a command line interface. To run DarwinPorts you must have either Mac OS X Developer Tools (for 10.2.x) or XCode (for 10.3.x) installed.

SourceForge.net (sourceforge.net) is the Mecca for open-source software for all platforms, including the Mac. Search the site for "Mac OS" and you'll discover hundreds of projects ranging from finished, polished applications to just-hatched ideas. The OS X section of SourceForge.net's sister site, freshmeat.net (osx.freshmeat.net), also delivers thousands of applications, utilities, and games.

Apple's Web site serves up a selection of high-quality open-source applications at www.apple.com/downloads/macosx/unix_open_source. The BSD Unix foundation known as Darwin, part of OS X, is itself open source. In addition to downloadable binaries and source code, Apple offers reams of documentation for developers who want to build on the project themselves at developer.apple.com/Darwin. ▲

by Kevin Savetz